Radical Space

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF THE PEOPLE

a zine, based on the book by Margaret Kohn

By Solarpunk Surf Club

"Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world." - Archimedes

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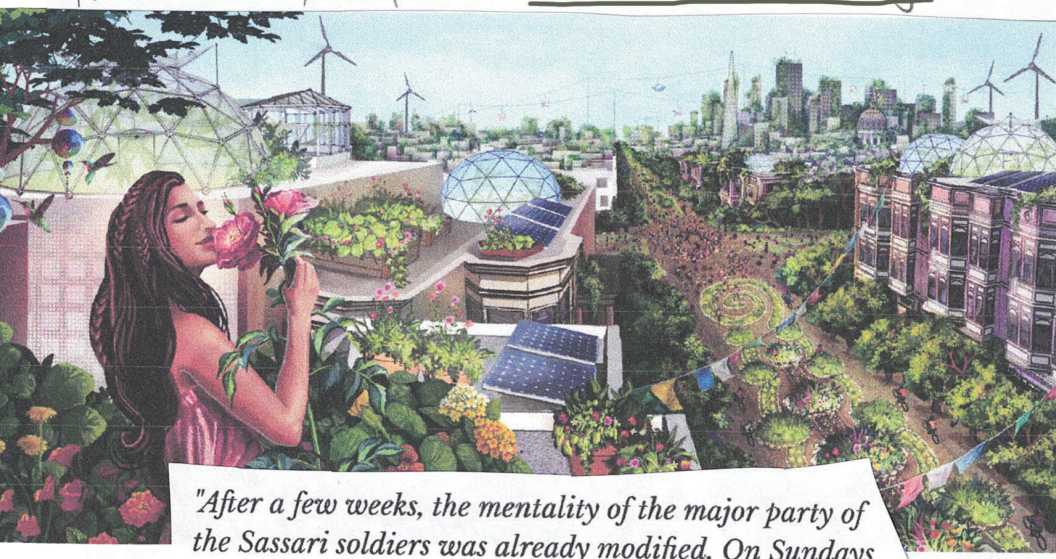
A Story

In the winter of 1919 the Sassari Brigade, a unit of Sardinian soldiers, was sent to Turin, perhaps the most militant working-class city in Europe, heir apparent to the revolutionary passion and discipline of St. Petersburg. This regiment was particularly hated by the Turinese workers because the Sardinian soldiers were famous for their loyalist credentials, which they had acquired in 1917 as a result of their crucial role in crushing labor unrest by firing on strikers. Workers and soldiers, it seemed, were doomed to face each other as enemies. Both sides probably feared the inevitable confrontation. What could have been a violent clash, however, became a transformative encounter.

This time the encounter did not take place on the barricades. At the end of 1919 or the beginning of 1920, the period that Italian historians call the Bienno Rosso, the "two red years," workers and soldiers met on the streets, int eh cooperative cafes, and on the margins of neighborhood festivals. Antonio Gramsci spoke in neighborhood socialist circles across the city, emphasizing the history of oppression in his own native Sardinia and underlining the experience of exploitation shared by southern peasants and northern workers. There was a mobilization throughout the city to engage in "socialist and proletariat propaganda"—which involved approaching the soldiers in the street and inviting them for a glass of wine in order to talk about the workers' native region, Turin, how the workers lived, and what they wanted. the results were as follows:

This is basically the plot of The Fifth Sacred Thing



"After a few weeks, the mentality of the major party of the Sassari soldiers was already modified. On Sundays there wasn't a neighborhood circle (for example, socialist club, usually organized around a cooperative bar/cafe) where there weren't a few of these soldiers. In the barracks, the counterrevolutionary speeches of the officers weren't listened to as religiously like before. . . . From the same barracks some rifles disappeared and the officers could never figure out where they ended up. During popular demonstrations the sympathy of the soldiers for the people appeared evident. The Sassari Brigade was not the Sassari Brigade anymore. . . .And a few months after its arrival in Turin it was sent away from this dangerous "center of infection."

I. Can't. Breathe.

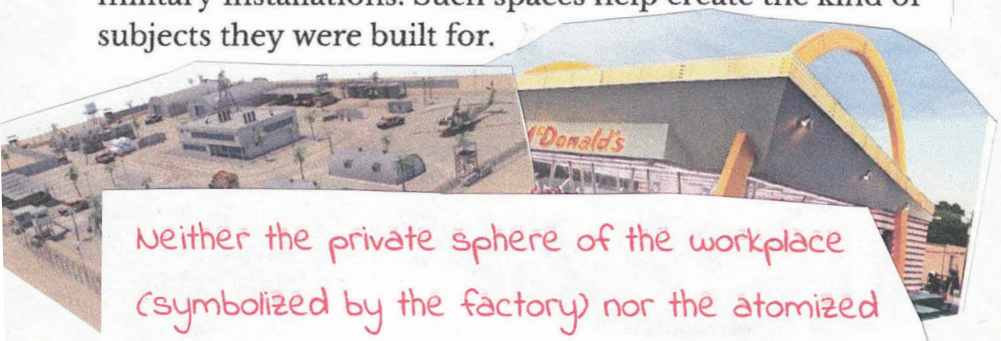
I feel suffocated under the collapse of social institutions of the working class. We don't own our bars, our union halls, our own clubs, sports leagues, or co-ops.

On top of this, surveillance is at an all-time high and access to land is constrained by overpriced speculative real estate markets.

Historically, fascism targeted workers' spaces precisely because they posed a formidable alternative to existing powers

If democracy is to be substantive and not merely formal, it cannot be something that takes place exclusively on the terrain of the state, nor can it be reasonably isolated from economics, one of the most significant sources of power.

Dominated spaces are created for "standardized citizens who are uniform in their needs and interchangeable," totally lacking original ideas, distinctive traditions, and history. These spaces include MacDonald'ses as well as military installations. Such spaces help create the kind of subjects they were built for.

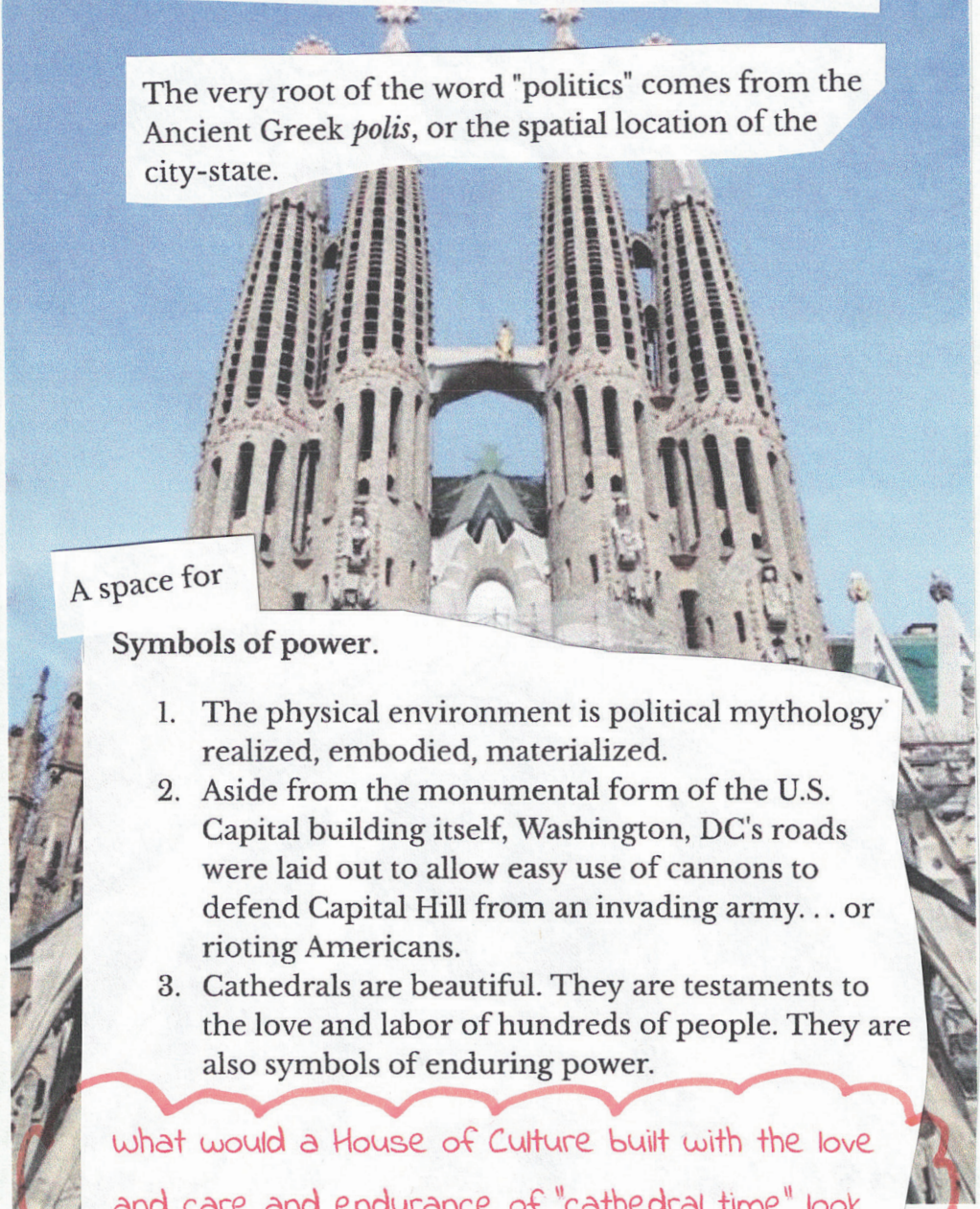


Neither the private sphere of the workplace (symbolized by the factory) nor the atomized arena of mass communication can create the space for solidarity, critique, and experimentation characteristic of the popular public sphere. Physical proximity creates solidarity by facilitating the implicit processes whereby individuals share and constantly revise interpretations. . . .It is only in this reaffirmed reality that an atmosphere of collective revolt comes about, that the workers begin to talk, make suggestions, and become active.

Appropriated spaces subvert this logic. They are produced by ordinary people, using a set of skills adapted to a particular context and acquired gradually through experimentation and revision. Their diversity reflects the conditions under which they were produced—the unique combination of human creativity, inherited experience, and available resources applied to meet immediate goals

Space, Territory, and Ecology: Building a geography of power

The very root of the word "politics" comes from the Ancient Greek *polis*, or the spatial location of the city-state.



A space for

Symbols of power.

1. The physical environment is political mythology realized, embodied, materialized.
2. Aside from the monumental form of the U.S. Capital building itself, Washington, DC's roads were laid out to allow easy use of cannons to defend Capital Hill from an invading army. . . or rioting Americans.
3. Cathedrals are beautiful. They are testaments to the love and labor of hundreds of people. They are also symbols of enduring power.

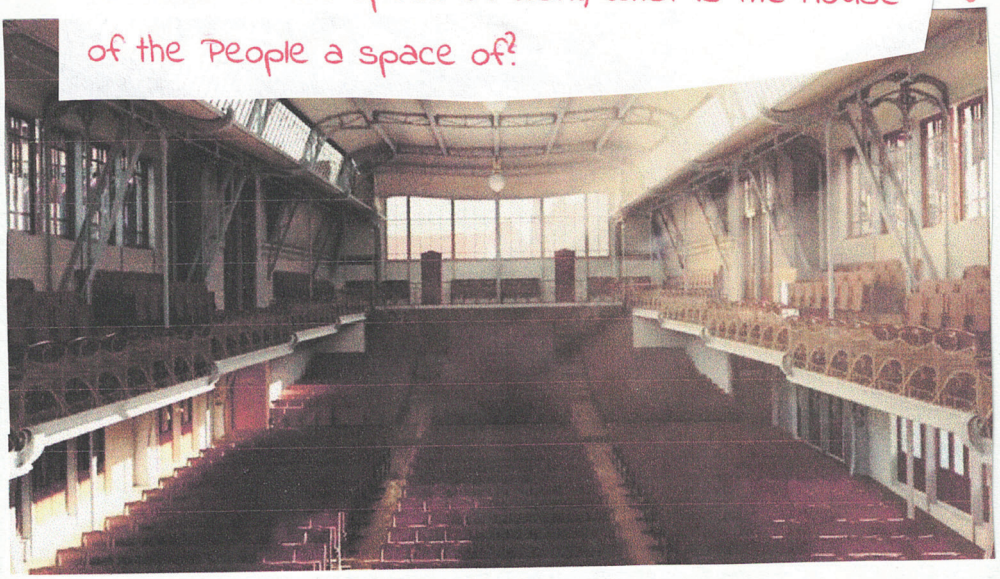
what would a House of Culture built with the love and care and endurance of "cathedral time" look like?

A space for

Scripts for encounter and assembly that appear immutable and part of the landscape. Certain social relationships are often materially instantiated in places.

. "imagination augments the values of reality." But the reverse is also true. Reality augments imagination. . . Piety emerges from church going, and nationalism is a product of the barracks and the village school.

If the home is the space of family and the factory or office is the space of work, what is the House of the People a space of?



A space for

Concrete needs like shelter, relaxation, laughter with friends, food and water, clothing, and rewarding collective labor.

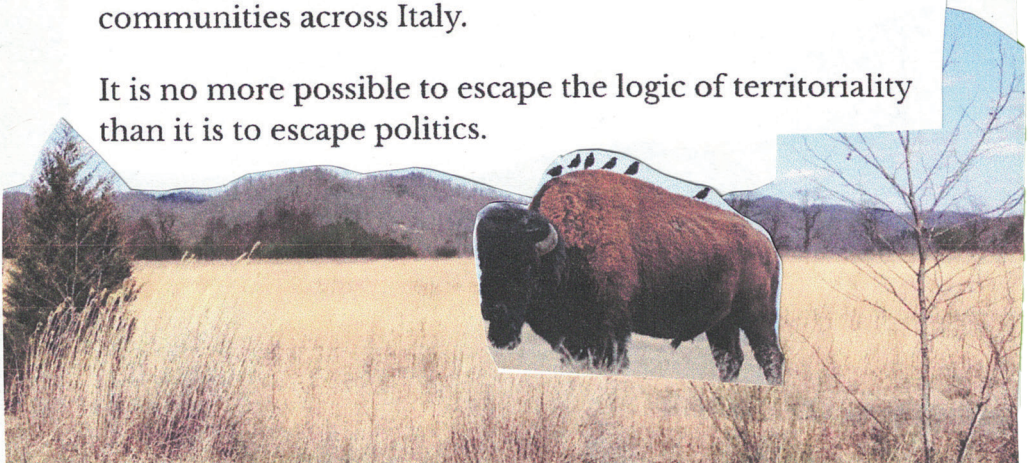
A space for

Commitment to Territory

Both nomads and sedentary peoples need markers. Nomads in particular need markers to serve as reference points that create implicit pathways through vast territories.

The houses of the people were not utopias in Foucault's sense, that is, imaginary sites with no real place. They were very embedded in both rural and urban communities across Italy.

It is no more possible to escape the logic of territoriality than it is to escape politics.



Radical Democratic Space in History

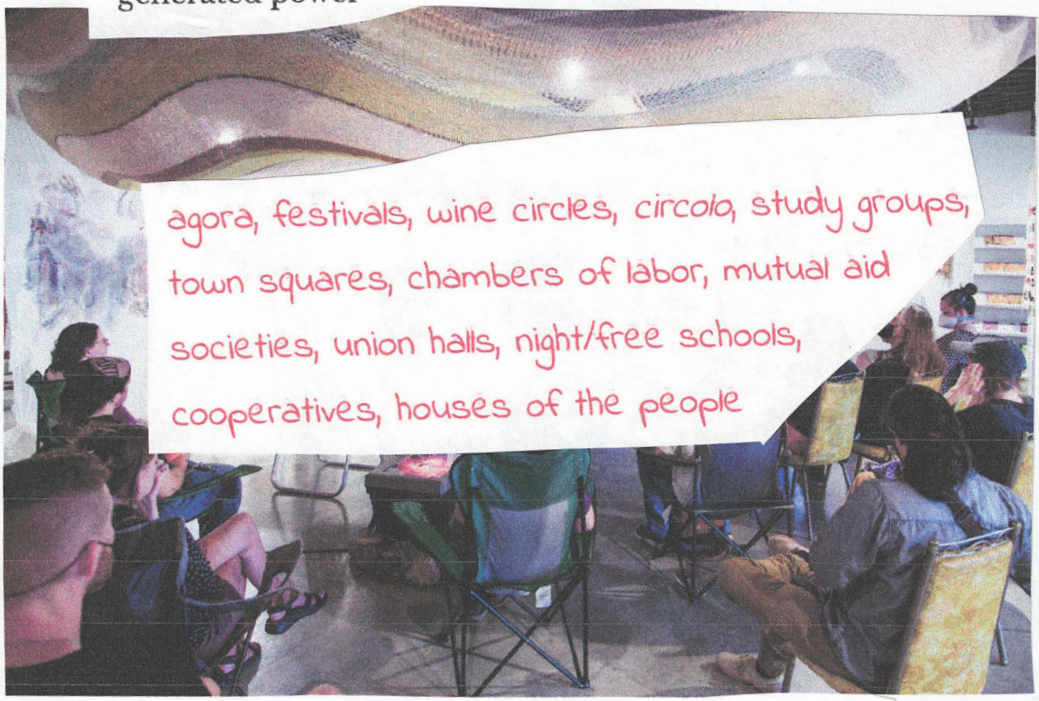
The desire for collective control over economic life was a widely shared aspiration that unified different class fragments, generated resources for oppositional projects, and provided a base for political struggle.

"But one difficulty of the free multiplication of the cooperative is the absence of spaces adapted for the goal. Each village—in order to coordinate the various forms of workers' organizations—will have its house of the people with meeting rooms, offices, theaters, public facilities, pharmacy, labor and production cooperatives, storage of agricultural goods. The vision is splendid and there is no reason to doubt its realization. All'opera tutti!" - Antonio Vergnanini

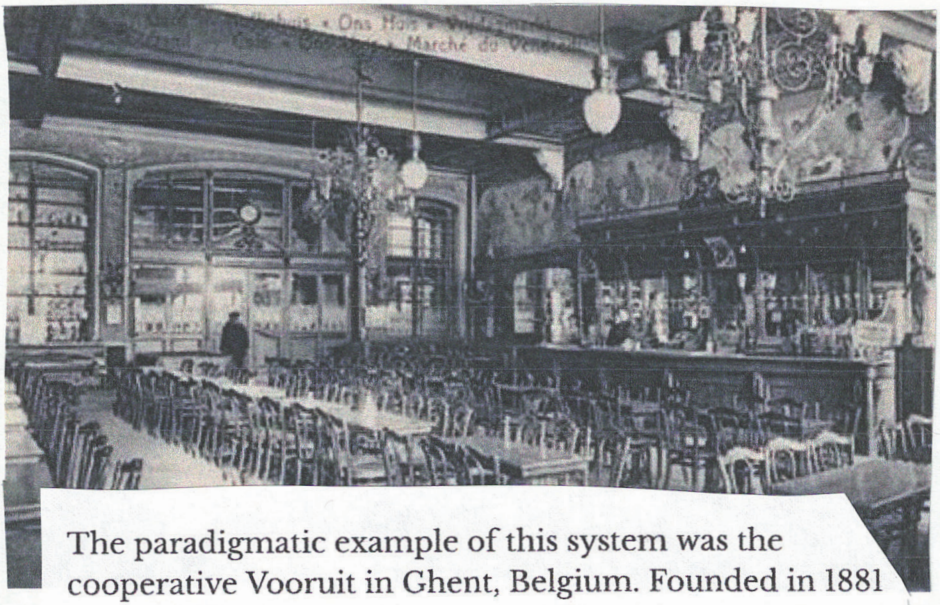
This book emphasizes the social and political dimensions of the built environment, its capacity to shape individuals; actions, identities, and interpretations. It looks at sites that provided an opportunity to encounter new people and ideas, to communicate controversial theories under conditions of relative security, and the experiment with new identities. These spaces linked pragmatic and symbolic functions. They served to locate stories, preserve memories, and embody utopian desires. During the day, workers were quite literally "objects", inputs in the production process with only instrumental value. At the cooperative or at the house of the people they became subjects, co-creators of an alternate world.

A space for

Political sites outside the state where the disenfranchised generated power


agora, festivals, wine circles, circolo, study groups,
town squares, chambers of labor, mutual aid
societies, union halls, night/free schools,
cooperatives, houses of the people

Gnocchi-Viani explicitly recognized the need for a "privileged, central place in which consciousness is produced." He argued that the "autonomous consciousness of the working class is not an immediate reflection of the conditions of work and of life (and even less the result of an external force elaborated by intellectuals and spread among workers)" but instead is the product of "the experience of voluntary association, independently fashioned and lived." Gnocchi-Viani rejeceted both the extreme structuralist and extreme idealist approaches to socialism. To truly become citizens, workers must inhabit, at least some of the time, a place in whcih they experience themselves as the bearers of rights and responsibilities, with the capacity to make decisions collectively. For Gnocchi-Viani, this place was the chamber of labor



The paradigmatic example of this system was the cooperative Vooruit in Ghent, Belgium. Founded in 1881 on the initiative of a group of textile workers in order to fight the high cost of living, Vooruit, benefiting from the low price of grain after the abolition of import duties, was able to expand its operations at the turn of the century. In 1902 it constructed a major building, Ons Huis (Our House), to serve as a center of working-class political, social, and economic life. In addition to the consumer cooperative, Vooruit included meeting rooms, a restaurant, library, adult education program, theater, cafe/bar, socialist newspaper, headquarters for the Belgian Workers' Party, and space for eighteen other political and cultural organizations.[38] In 1903 Vooruit entered into production by opening a textile-spinning cooperative. Vooruit also helped found producer cooperatives as a strategy for fighting unemployment, and it provided a livelihood to workers fired during labor conflicts. Vooruit also provided start-up capital, logistical aid, and space to such initiatives. In 1904 it established the first medical clinic, financed out of the social funds of the cooperative. To keep costs down it opened its own bakeries to supply low-cost bread, and in 1910 it constructed a brewery. Thus, the Vooruit complex integrated production, consumption, politics, social services, and recreation under the auspices of Ons Huis.

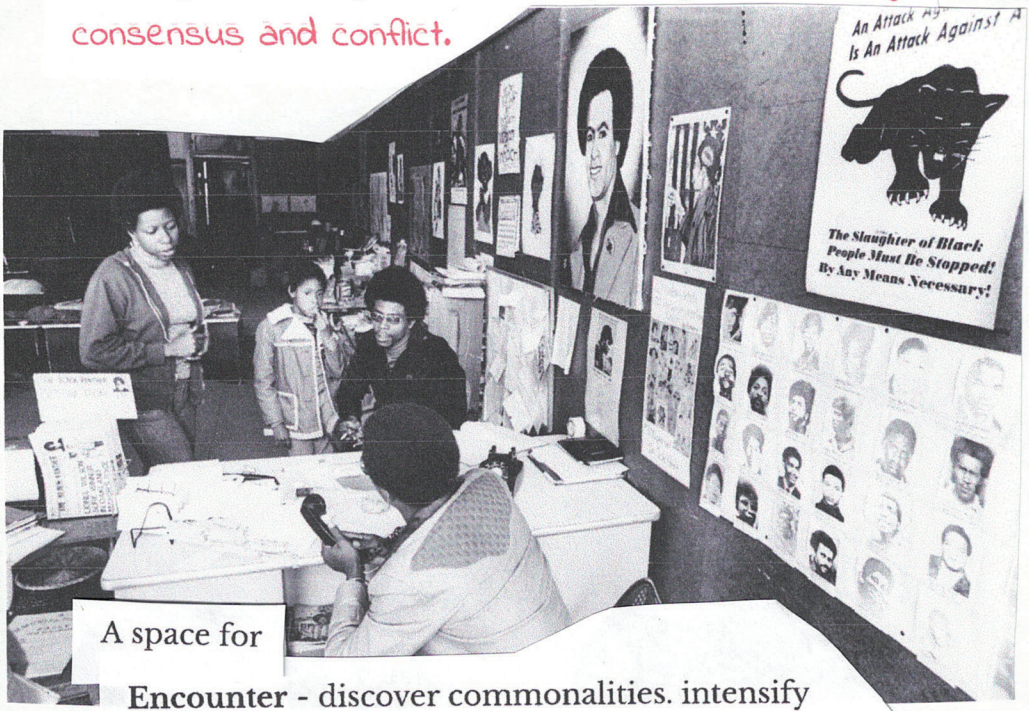
Waiting only teaches waiting. By acting, we learn to act!

The success of the chambers of labor came from their ability to link direct economic interest to political identity, class consciousness, and action.

"Our case di tutti [houses of everyone] must be beautiful, not for monumental vanity, not so that it will be the only thing seen from far away, while it overshadows the houses of our members. The beauty of the house of the people isn't like that of the church or communal palace, which obscures and hides the poverty of the workers. It is not for vanity but for inspiration and education. It must be a place where we learn to become more demanding, that is, more civilized. . . .We should want to make our cooperative beautiful, for the same reasons that we want to improve our house. It must be the place where we learn to become more demanding, that is to say, more civilized."

Home, Agora, Temple, Fortress \\ Mutualism, Cooperation, Resistance

places, practices, and modes of sociality that sustained a tenuous balance between liberty and equality, autonomy and solidarity, unity and plurality, consensus and conflict.



A space for

Encounter - discover commonalities. intensify prefigurative social relations and solidarity.

Social spaces create "solidarity that can be grasped with the senses."

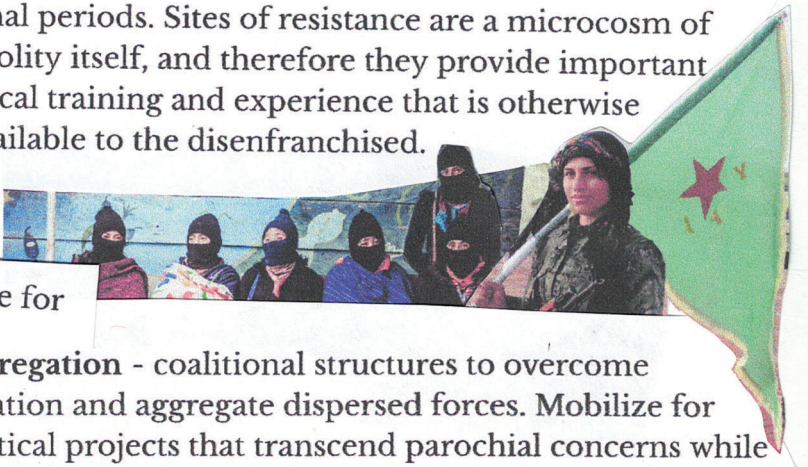
Solidarity does not arise directly from contact between people; rather, it depends on how the interactions are framed. This framing is achieved by space. Physical spaces mark off a context in which certain attributes are highlighted and others are obscured.

A space for

Resistance - fostering oppositional practices by sheltering counterhegemonic ideas and identities.

The ordering principle of one "other space" can serve to challenge the ordering principle of society at large. Although this alterity may be purely symbolic, it can also have transformative effects by making it possible to temporarily suspend the scripted behaviors and identities that determine interactions

In a political movement, these spaces facilitate and deepen the connection between militants and supporters of the cause as well as between times of mobilization and normal periods. Sites of resistance are a microcosm of the polity itself, and therefore they provide important political training and experience that is otherwise unavailable to the disenfranchised.



A space for

Aggregation - coalitional structures to overcome isolation and aggregate dispersed forces. Mobilize for political projects that transcend parochial concerns while maintaining accountability to the base.

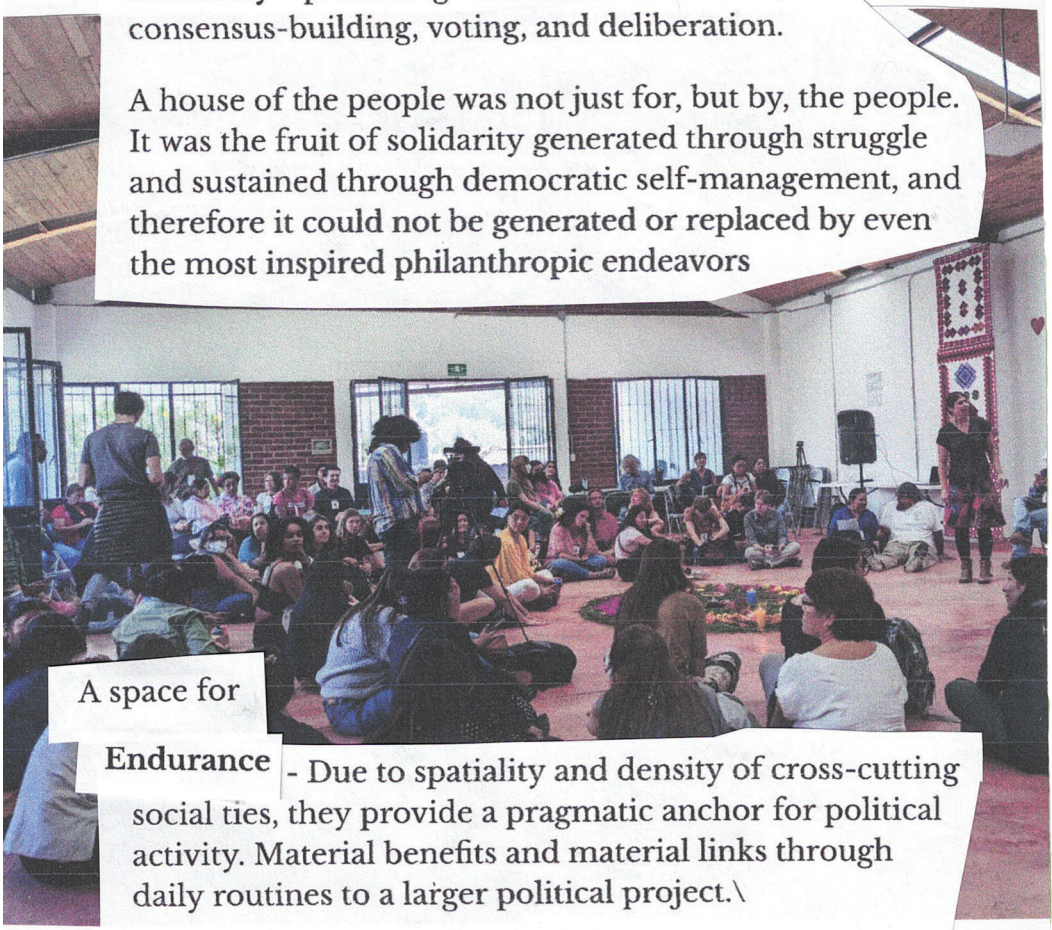
The cooperative provided a location that served as an informal social center, a nodal point of communication, and a link between different associations. It condensed dispersed individuals' inchoate needs and transformed them into a political force

Rather than a growing differentiation between various types of organizations, we see the emergence of an interlinked set of functionally autonomous yet highly integrated initiatives

A space for

Assembly - practicing democratic structures, consensus-building, voting, and deliberation.

A house of the people was not just for, but by, the people. It was the fruit of solidarity generated through struggle and sustained through democratic self-management, and therefore it could not be generated or replaced by even the most inspired philanthropic endeavors



A space for

Endurance - Due to spatiality and density of cross-cutting social ties, they provide a pragmatic anchor for political activity. Material benefits and material links through daily routines to a larger political project.\

The church was a nodal point that seemed to link immutably the eternal and the temporal, the local and the universal, the self and the community. It was a place that tied the material world of sensation—incense, candles, songs, images—to the social and spiritual worlds. . . Place is the anchor of meaning and memory. Power relations are inscribed in places and reproduced through the experiences of people who inhabit them. Spatial formations are not like opinions that can be changed at will. They are relatively enduring structures and symbols of the social world. But they are not neutral, static, or silent. . .

Once established, these new places were constant reminders of the new citizens' aspiration for a different distribution of power.

Most of the cooperatives, chambers of labor, and houses of the people were modest constructions, built in vernacular styles by carpenters rather than architects. Nevertheless. . . the builders believed that a microcosm of their ideal would help materialize their vision on a broader scale. They believed in the transformative effects of space

Creating spaces of resistance is an example of world-building activity. World building, however, is not like system building. It is beset by contradictions, setbacks, unintended consequences, and all the other messy facets of social life. World building is not the work of God the father, the omniscient narrator, or other great men. It is achieved by men and women as they try to adapt their material and social environments to meet their needs. Buying bread and drinking wine at the socialist cooperative, studying and discussing politics at the chamber of labor-these are the activities through which people try to build a world in which humanity and dignity are possible.

The faces of people who declared themselves free against the rise of fascism in Spain

"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."

- Albert Schweitzer

Radical Spaces

in the so-called United States

Gary, IN - Joybomb
Lexington, KY - artfarm
Jackson, MI - Cooperation Jackson
NYC - Woodbine, Mil Mundos
Cleveland, OH - Rhizome House
Portland, OR - Social Justice Action Center
Portland, OR - TLC Farm
Austin, TX - Monkeywrench Books
Quilcene, WA - Gray Coast Guildhall
Tucson, AZ - BCC
Oakland, CA - Tamarack
Arcata, CA - Moss Oak Commons
Atlanta, GA - South Bend Commons
Chicago, IL - PO Box Collective
Chicago, IL - The Orphanage
Bloomington, IN - Redbud Books
Bloomington, IN - The Overlook
Bloomington, IN - Indiana R[illegible]very Alliance

For a more comprehensive list, see
https://slingshotcollective.org/radical-contact-list/

www.solarpunksurf.club